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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DJIBOUTI 000279

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DEPARTMENT FOR AF/E
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SUBJECT: PM SPEECH TRIGGERS UNUSALLY SHARP PUBLIC PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATE

CLASSIFIED BY: J. Swan, Ambassador; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. Djibouti's National Assembly-generally regarded as a relatively weak and non-controversial body-recently heard an unusually heated debate during its first ordinary session of the year. The President of the second most powerful ruling coalition partner-who represents the historic, formerly armed opposition movement "Front for the Restoration of Unity and Democracy" (FRUD)-delivered a surprisingly pointed and critical speech. In another unexpected move, the state-run newspaper "La Nation" covered this sharp exchange prominently. The FRUD speech underlines that while the opposition parties remaining outside the "Union for a Presidential Majority" (UMP) remain fairly impotent, there is still a vigorous give-and-take among parties within the multi-ethnic UMP, which includes the FRUD. As Djibouti's attention focuses increasingly on 2011 presidential elections, the National Assembly may become a more active airing-ground for what were previously relatively private intra-UMP debates. END SUMMARY.

COALITION PARTNER SHARPLY CRITICAL

¶2. (SBU) Prime Minister Dileita Mohamed Dileita delivered his annual "State of the Nation" speech on general government policy during the National Assembly's formal opening session on March 1, as required by Djiboutian law. The Prime Minister's uncontroversial speech outlined GODJ accomplishments and upcoming priorities, with a particular emphasis on programs to fight poverty, as well as on the government's response to the ongoing Djibouti-Eritrea border standoff. As usual, the National Assembly's first ordinary session March 23 featured a general debate on the Prime Minister's address. The RPP's response, delivered by Mohamed Dini Farah, was an expected commendation of the speech and the GODJ's overall policy. FRUD President Ali Mohamed Daoud, known as "Jean Marie," however, was strongly critical of the Prime Minister and of the state of the nation. In his speech, Daoud criticized the Prime Minister for merely listing a "catalogue" of already-announced projects and initiatives, without giving concrete objectives, and without providing supporting statistical data. He alleged that there was no chance for the National Assembly to "validate" or "vote" for the government's policy plan. Even a real debate was difficult, he argued, when the Prime Minister cited "no numbers on the unemployment rate, poverty levels, or development indicators...even the demographic data of the country have become a state secret." (NOTE. A long-awaited national census, the first in several decades, is currently slated to begin April 12, after being postponed several times. END NOTE). Daoud's main criticism was that Djibouti's recent economic growth was not benefiting all

Djiboutians equally. He especially pointed to "development disparities between the capital and the regions." While praising the concept of the national poverty reduction initiative, he criticized it for being slow to produce projects and results, and asserted that Djibouti had become a "two speed society."

13. (SBU) Daoud further faulted the GODJ for not fully implementing the decentralization agreements that were part of the FRUD-GODJ peace accords. Without an "adequate financial system" to fund regional governments, he stated, decentralization is an "empty shell." Daoud concluded his speech with a series of questions. If Djibouti is "theoretically a democracy," he asked, "why does this democracy seem to be broken, frozen, or even blocked?" Furthermore, he asked rhetorically whether there was a real balance and separation of powers, a truly independent judicial system, a free press, and an effective electoral system. Daoud called for large-scale institutional reforms, to be presented to the population as a referendum. Finally, Daoud explained that he had chosen to present his criticisms publicly because he considered the National Assembly to be the "best forum for political debate and democratic expression."

CRITICISM FEATURED IN GOVERNMENT PRESS

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14. (SBU) The state-run, French-language newspaper "La Nation" printed Daoud's speech, as well as Mohamed Dini Farah's uncontroversial RPP address, in its March 25 edition. Only a few sentences summarized the Prime Minister's rebuttal, in which he called Daoud's remarks "hateful and aggressive." In the March 26 edition, "La Nation" introduced a transcription of the Prime Minister's response with: "honor to Jean-Marie and now let's hear out the other one." What followed was an ad-hoc transcription of the Prime Minister's fairly emotional and agitated on-the-spot response, rather than an edited-for-print version. It printed numerous run-on-sentences and other gaffes, without editorial clean up, and was littered with "(sic)."

15. (SBU) The March 30 edition of "La Nation" then printed a revised response from the Prime Minister, in the form of a finished letter addressed to Daoud. In the letter, the Prime Minister criticized Daoud for stooping to what he considered ad hominem attacks, and for lambasting a government policy which Daoud himself-as a UMP member-was also responsible for formulating and implementing. He defended the GODJ policies on job creation, attracting foreign investments, and aiding the poorest segments of Djiboutian society, and responded to Daoud's criticisms by supplying several supporting data points. He also answered Daoud's basic questions about the state of Djibouti's democracy by pointing to Daoud's own speech, which he argued confirmed the existence of a "political debate within the UMP," and the "evolution of our democratic progress." Furthermore, he argued, the publication of Daoud's speech, complete with "personal attacks on the Prime Minister and the policy of the government" in a state-run newspaper, was the "best response" to Daoud's question about freedom of the press. The Prime Minister ended by accusing Daoud of making "unfounded criticisms" in a ploy to draw attention to himself." If Daoud thought it was the "right moment to ask for something," the Prime Minister challenged, he was "ready to listen."

16. (C) The March 30 edition of "La Nation" also featured a change in the editorial credits, with Adil Ahmed Youssouf, former deputy editor, replacing Ali Barkat Siradj as editor-in-chief. Siradj, an Afar, is said to be sympathetic to Daoud, and to have had former

personal differences with the Prime Minister. Yousseuf is a Somali (Issa clan). No reasons were given for the personnel change, and while Siradj was widely rumored to have been replaced over his publication of Daoud's speech and his unflattering version of the Prime Minister's response, he is also known to have serious health problems.

17. (C) COMMENT. Daoud's speech particularly targeted Prime Minister Dileita Mohamed Dileita. Dileita, an Afar member of the RPP, is seen by some Afars as too pliant, and as an insufficiently forceful advocate for the Afar community. Personal relations between Daoud and Dileita have long been rocky. Daoud, like the Prime Minister, is an Afar born in Tadjourah. He was educated as a health technician and nurse in France, and was closely involved in Djibouti's independence movement. He was elected FRUD president in 1991, and played a pivotal role in the FRUD-GODJ negotiations that ended the Afar-Somali civil conflict of the 1990s. In 1999, the FRUD joined the UMP ruling coalition. Following Daoud's speech, public gossip increased that the FRUD-a historically Afar party-might be angling for the Prime Minister spot to go to one of their own in return for remaining in the UMP coalition and supporting a third term for President Guelleh. The FRUD holds 12 of 60 National Assembly seats-not enough to block a constitutional amendment. However, their continuing alliance with the RPP remains foundational to Djibouti's delicately constructed set of compromises between ethnic and political groups. END COMMENT.
SWAN